

ABC WORLD NEWS TONIGHT
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AP03>LIBEL CASES >JENNINGS: The Sharon libel trial is only the latest in a series of major libel cases to get a lot of public attention. William Westmoreland's lawsuit against CBS is still going on. Our chief correspondent, Richard Threlkeld, has a status report tonight on what seems to be a new focus on libel in America.

THRELKELD: The double bill that's been playing at the federal courthouse in Manhattan, Gen. Sharon against Time magazine and Gen. Westmoreland against CBS News, are just two of the more star-studded legal battles of late that have put the American press on trial and raised embarrassing questions about how it goes about its business. Sen. Paul Laxalt is suing some California newspapers for a quarter of a billion dollars for a story about his alleged gambling associations. The CIA complained to the Federal Communications Commission about this ABC News story that the CIA had threatened the life of a CIA operative. (footage of interview from Sept. 19, 1984, ABC News Investigation): UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: Did they tell you why they wanted you to get rid of him?

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: That he was a company and he obviously...

THRELKELD: ABC later retracted part of the story and the FCC dismissed the complaint, saying there no evidence of deliberate distortion. Since 1980, juries have awarded newsmakers who claim to have been libeled in excess of a million dollars in at least 20 different cases. Even though a lot of those judgments have been reduced or overturned, libel has become the legal profession's latest growth industry. This, in spite of a long standing Supreme Court rule that a newsmaker cannot be libeled unless he can prove not only that he wronged, but knowingly or recklessly wronged. The reasons have much to do with the press itself. It's regarded by a lot of Americans as intrusive, negative, insufferably arrogant and mostly unaccountable. MICHAEL MCDONALD (American Legal Foundation): The press finds itself in the peculiar position of, of saying, 'Trust us,' and asking the people to believe that they're not like other human institutions, that they make mistakes. And they never bring their own mistakes to the attention of the public.

THRELKELD: And the news has become big business. People figure the press can afford to pay. RICHARD SALANT (former network executive): It doesn't have that special image to the public that it used to have and it should have as being something more than just an ordinary grubby business, the having some public purpose beyond making money.

TRELKELD: Richard Salant, the lawyer and former network news executive, thinks that even so, going to court is not the way to go about righting the wrongs in the news.

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